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ABSTRACT

This paper, written for mental health professionals, focuses on learning, teaching, and professional issues in radio talk show psychology. The discussion focuses on the educational aspects of media psychology, including learning about others' behaviors and problems and alternative points of view, the role and behavior of professionals, how to handle problems and make better decisions, and the availability of help for problems. Teaching issues of importance to the program host, such as maintaining variety in the show's format, keeping topics and comments concrete and less abstract, maintaining enthusiasm and effective timing, confronting irrational beliefs, and dealing with role conflict, are presented. Professional issues including appropriateness of the radio format for principles of psychology, the seriousness of callers' concerns, the potential dangers in giving advice to anonymous callers, and professional image are individually addressed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of radio talk show psychology for the domain of undergraduate courses, in which students are taught self-help skills. (BL)

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Radio Talk-Show Psychology: Teaching-Learning and Professional Issues[1]

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Paper presented at annual meetings of American Psychological Association, Division 2, Anaheim, California; August, 1983.

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Abstract

In hosting a daily two-hour radio talk show, the first author was confronted with a number of teaching-learning and professional issues. The teaching-learning concerns are related to keeping the show informative, educational, entertaining, and interesting to the general public. Maintaining variety in the show's format, keeping topics and comments concrete and less abstract, maintaining enthusiasm, timing, confronting irrational beliefs, and dealing with role conflicts are important aspects of the host's task in running the program. A number of professional issues are raised with regard to this program and other radio-talk shows hosted by mental health professionals. They are: Is radio an appropriate place to give psychology away? Do such shows turn into attempts to give "quasi-therapy?" Are the seemingly "simple questions" callers ask smokescreens for more serious issues? Does the information presented produce more good than harm? Will the lure of the media make psychologists reckless? Do talk-shows create an unfavorable or distorted image of the profession? Answers to these questions are provided and the issues with talk-show psychology are extened to the domain of undergraduate courses where students are taught self-help skills.

Radio Talk-Show Psychology: Teaching-Learning and Professional Issues

During the past 10 years, psychologists have become increasingly visible in the media. They have served as hosts of radio and television talk shows; commentators on radio and television interview programs; feature story developers on psychological topics for radio and television; and as contributors to articles and feature stories in newspapers and magazines. Discussing this activity with colleagues reveals a number of criticisms. They include concerns that psychologists have "cheapened the profession" by popularizing it; that people's problems have become a source of entertainment; that media work is unethical; and that psychologists have shown they will sell their soul to the "devil" for a few dollars. As with any critique, there is probably a certain amount of truth in what has been said. But, there is also a lot of distortion and misunderstanding in the interpretation about the work of psychologists in the media. The issue is not whether we should include the public airwaves in the practice of psychology but how we should do it.

In an attempt to answer the question how a psychologist can legitimately extend the practice of psychology to the public airwaves, the first author joined the ranks of media psychologists in July of 1982. He began a daily talk show from 6 to 8 p.m. on WCKY radio in Cincinnati called "Practical Psychology." The major goal of the show was to inform the general public about aspects of psychology that were relevant to their daily lives. It provided one of the authors an excellent opportunity to extend his interest in teaching self-help psychology from the classroom (Grasha, 1974) and textbooks (Grasha, 1983; Grasha and Kirschenbaum, 1980) to a radio format. It also allowed the author an opportunity to extend his experiments with the teaching-learning process (c.f., Fuhrmann and Grasha, 1983) beyond the college classroom. The show has captured the interests of the general public and was recently renewed for a second year.

While developing the show, the second author (a practicing clinical social worker and

and clinical psychology doctoral student) was working on her MA thesis under the supervision of the first author. A few comments between discussing the lines of a MA thesis led to a number of concerns about how to effectively teach to the general public on the radio and the ethical and professional responsibilities that must be considered by psychologists entering radio and television work. An additional insight for us was the fact that the same concerns were also relevant to teaching the self-help oriented courses that are becoming numerous and popular in the psychology curriculum.

Teaching-Learning Issues: What Listeners Learn

When discussing their radio and television work, mental health professionals generally describe them as educational. Dr. Ruth Westheimer, for example, described her show "Sexually Speaking" on WYNY, New York in a recent CBS radio interview as an "extended classroom" (Note 1). The need for such shows to be educational is also stressed in the ethical guidelines proposed by the Association of Media Psychologists. Guideline 11 clearly states that "psychology can only address issues briefly in an educational manner and cannot address the complexity of a specific individual. Information given should be general, provide options and stress that nothing works for everyone" (Note 2).

If such shows are educational and informative, what can the general public learn? We believe there are several things:

People acquire information regarding how they and others behave and the some of the reasons why certain actions occur. Reading any newspaper or just casually talking to people will quickly point out the relative lack of sophistication about principles of human behavior that exist in our society. As Edward Busch, a nationally syndicated radio talk-show host and a media consultant to WCKY said; "you have to remember that your average is not college educated nor do they have training in psychology. Their exposure to psychological principles is based in their conventional wisdom and information provided in the mass media " (Note 3).

The relative lack of training in psychology is even true for those listeners with

college degrees. Introductory Psychology is generally the only psychology requirement in most major fields of study outside of the social sciences. Thus, what appears to the professional as a "minor point" becomes a "profound insight" to a listener. Callers to the show have expressed gratitude on the air for learning such things as: "paying children for cleaning a yard beforehand probably accounts them doing a sloppy job and quitting early; seeking a compromise is sometimes an effective way to resolve an argument; too much food, drink, and activity before bedtime can contribute to insomnia; treatments exist for phobias; conflict may serve a useful purpose; traditional sex roles are often a source of stress in a marriage; and that a first step in resolving a problem is to take responsibility for solving their problems.

Listeners learn that other people have problems similar to theirs. People often feel that their problems are unique and that noone else in the world has them. Listeners who hear a caller discuss a phobia, sexual conflict with a spouse, discipline problem with a child, feelings of depression or loneliness, or some other experience often find in the caller someone who has a problem similar to or as bad as their own. On more than one occasion, a caller was surprised to learn that their unique and unusual concern was neither. Hence support and reassurance is derived from just listening to the show.

People get ideas for how to handle personal problems and to make better decisions. Listeners are reminded in many ways that it is best to define our problems in terms of needs that are not met and in such a way that alternatives ideas for solutions are considered. The need to plan, to priortize, and to break problems into smaller parts are also emphasized. Finally, considering the pro's and con's of various solutions and thinking about how a solution will work in the short and long run are issues often raised with callers. If used well, such things are likely to contribute to people trying to resolve some of their everyday concerns.

Listeners are exposed to alternative points of view exist on topics they may have thought were cut and dried. The Cincinnati area is rather conservative and discussions of

homosexuality, human sexuality, drug abuse, sex education, and divorce often elicit religious, rigid moralistic and rather limited responses. For people to be exposed to a psychological point of view on such matters is something that some listeners have never considered. This comes across in comments from callers like: "I never considered homosexuality in terms of its implications as a legitimate sex role and lifestyle issue; I wasn't aware that drug abuse in teens is not just a problem of the lower class; It's amazing to me that men and women over 65 can still enjoy sexual relations." Of course, not everyone agrees with the "new look" in behavior. As one caller said, "those psychiatrists who said its alright to be a homosexual if you feel good about it must have rocks in their heads." "Pre-marital sex is simply wrong and the Bible says so very clearly. You would be better off reading the Bible than those psychology books you studied."

People get to see that their personal points of view about behavior are sometimes consistent with those of professionals and their ideas are not silly or stupid. On "Practical Psychology", listeners can comment on what other people say and on various topics that are discussed. Some are pleased to hear a psychologist agrees with them and others are delighted to discover that they have made good observations about behavior. And for those who preface their remarks with "I'm no professional and I hope you will not think what I have to say is silly or stupid," they typically come away from the conversation knowing a psychologist agrees they have a valuable comment. Such comments raise an interesting issue about what contributes to people believing their knowledge is defective. Perhaps it is simply a reflection of inadequacy based on life experience. Or, to use a caller's comment, "somehow I thought that psychologists and psychiatrists dealt with mysterious things. I never knew we had so much in common."

Listeners learn that professionals are not perfect, they disagree with one another, and sometimes they even have a sense of humor. A few callers have commented on some of their experiences with mental health professionals and they are not always positive. Charges of over prescribing drugs, being unavailable when needed, sexual advances, and

giving bad advice are mentioned. The host of the show and guests sometimes disagree with each other, the field is criticized, and a sense of humor is often present on the airwaves. Listeners need to hear such things to see that we are human beings and not mysterious entities with a form of black magic that cures people.

The radio audience learns that help is available. Not only can listeners obtain ideas for how to begin to tackle issues in their lives by listening or calling, they also are told about the availability of private practitioners, various public agencies and services, and support groups that can assist them with various problems. People do not have to feel that they are trapped in a problem with nowhere to turn. For some, the fact that their is a place to turn is something of which they were unaware.

Teaching-Learning Issues: Principles of Teaching on the Radio

It is clear that people can learn many things on the radio, and for many individuals, it maybe the only way they will learn it. Because it does and should serve an educational purpose, it is important that effective principles of teaching and learning be employed to make it work well. What follows are several of the "lessons learned" in designing the "Practical Psychology" program that contributes to it being an effective educational experience.

Variety in Format is Desirable

Giving the listener (student) variety in the classroom or on the radio is important. Listeners, like students in the classroom, need it to maintain their interest and motivation to pay attention. Doing a daily radio show places a special burden on the host to maintain that interest. While the format of the show must be relatively constant from day to day, variations within the elements is not only desirable but necessary. Each of the following devices is a part of each program unless otherwise noted.

Topics for listeners to discuss. Every show has a topic that is designed to elicit listener comments, problems, and questions. There are two categories of topics that have

been used to help organize a show. They are psychological issues raised in current news stories and more traditional psychological and human relations issues. The topics designed from international, national and local news stories give listeners a chance to voice their concerns, frustrations, anxieties, and points of view about such things. Thus, listeners could talk about a man who kidnapped and murdered a 6 year old child in Cincinnati; the meaning of the death of princess Grace Kelley; the massacre of palestinians; fears about purchasing food and drugstore products because of the Tylenol scare; and how to cope with unemployment. With such issues, the show probably serves not only an informative function but provides a safety valve for the tension some listeners experience around such concerns.

Traditional psychological and human relations issues have included such things as; alcohol and drug abuse in adults and teens; human sexuality; overeating and what to do about it; sleep disorders; understanding dreams; managing conflict; developing good communication skills; building trust in relationships; becoming more assertive; overcoming boredom and depression; problems in marriage; how to cope with divorce; managing our fears; and how to develop a more positive self image.

With all topics, listeners are invited to share their experiences, to ask questions, and to raise problems they may have in their life. To do this, the host presents listeners with questions to which they respond (e.g. What is the most irritating thing your neighbor did to you? Did you have a near death experience and what did you learn from it? What is the secret of a good marriage? Would you think a man was a sissy if he cried? What was the most difficult thing about turning forty? What was the most effective thing you did this week to overcome boredom? What is most stressful about the work that you do and are you able to cope with the stress well? The topics for listeners and the questions they can respond to must be quite broad and stated in such a way that listeners understand that they have something to contribute. The questions posed should not always ask them to share a personal problem they have because for some listeners it appears as if they are

dialing a clinic. Listener comments can be used to point out various principles of psychology.

Some topics do not draw many calls. In Cincinnati, discussions of sexual issues in particular do not light up the phone lines. A good example was the evening Dr. Ruth Westheimer was a guest on the show. She fields about 15-20 calls during the hour she is on in New York and the station estimates that several hundred people try to call her on Sunday Evening. She received six calls in Cincinnati and only three dealt with a question related to sexuality. The shows with the fewest number of calls dealt with "what to tell you children about sex; enhancing sexual relationships; and sexual functioning after age 60." Those shows had fewer than 10 calls each. In contrast, shows on sleep disorders and dreaming; how to develop better relationships with your pets; does capital punishment work; and what to do about teenage drinking drew 33 phone calls each. Cincinnati is a conservative city and people probably do not feel comfortable raising sexual issues on the air. Topics do not have to be sensational to draw listeners. People will respond to issues that affect many aspects of their daily existence besides their sexuality. To date, approximately 200 topics have been used on the radio show.

Mini-Presentations. Short presentations on the topic that of 2-3 minutes each are given to help introduce a topic and to fill time between callers. Five to seven of these are typically used over a show to illustrate certain principles of behavior related to the topic. The ideal situations is for a listener to raise a question or a problem that allows the host to present the information in the answer. But listeners do not always cooperate and "dead air" must be filled. Furthermore, because the audience shifts over the two hours, each presentation must be, relatively speaking, self-contained and it is difficult to link points together as one might in a lecture.

Help Line. People do have problems and concerns of a more general nature and that are not related to the topic of the evening. Thus, the Help Line feature gives listeners the opportunity to get some information and advice about their concern. It also allows

listeners to suggest something for discussion that is of immediate interest to them. Thus, it tends to build in an "open forum" feature to each show. Most shows have a combination of calls related to the topic and those that listeners raise on the Help Line feature. The distribution of calls between topics and the Help Line generally runs about 70% on the topic and 30% on the Help Line.

The host is not the only one who makes suggestions to a caller. Sometimes other listeners who have had similar problems call and talk about what they did to resolve it. In this way, a variety of strategies for dealing with problems can be aired. Some listener comments are not particularly sophisticated (e.g. in response to a caller experiencing problems communicating with a spouse, some listeners said; "remember your marriage vows, for better or for worse till death do us part." For a women whose husband had cheated on her, many listeners said; "you should throw the bum out."). Others, however, are quite good and reasonable. Generally speaking, there is a gap between the "folk psychology" of the listener and the "professional opinion" of the host. This has led to some disagreements on the air where listeners took exception to something said (e.g. "How could you suggest that pre-marital sex might be good for someone;" "What makes you think that beating a child does not help them to learn;" "How can you say that one person is not at fault in a conflict;" " Why should I compromise, he started it.") Overall, such discussions raise important issues about behavior and help people see that a psychologist is not necessarily the last word on an issue.

The Help Line feature does on occasion produce some responses that takes a show off in an unanticipated direction. A call about how to stop smoking leads to 17 others with people sharing their ideas and looking for more information. A woman calls to say her 75 year old husband had an affair with a younger woman and 15 callers later, other people with similar problems and with thoughts about how they handled it are on the air.

Mailbag. Listeners who find it inconvenient to call or are shy often write letters on the mailbag feature of the show. The letters are periodically aired as topics and listeners

and the host discuss ways the issues raised can be handled. The letter provides a concrete stimulus for listener comments and the discussion of psychological issues. In some respects, it also taps into the needs of listeners to play "Ann Landers" or "Dear Abby."

Guests. Once or twice a week, local mental health professionals or authors of books dealing with psychological topics are invited to the show. The guest is interviewed by the host and listeners and general information about the guest's area of expertise and specific information about a callers problem is shared. The guests allow issues beyond the host's areas of expertise to be discussed and provides listeners with alternative points of view. Since guests often appear on a long distance telephone connection, there is are very few limitations on what mental professionals can appear on the show. Literally, the " world of psychology" is available to the listener. To date, 100 local and national mental health professionals have appeared on the program.

Psychology in the News. Periodically, a news feature that illustrates people doing something interesting or that reports the results of a study is aired. The source of these items are newspapers, magazines, journals, and various books. They are mostly used a filler items when calls are slow and the host has exhausted whatever points he wanted to make about a topic. Occasionally, people will respond to the item since they are often presented with a question for the listener to consider.

All of above format features of "Practical Psychology" have generated 4500 phone calls or a average of 14 phone calls per evening. The fewest number of callers has been 2 and the largest number has been 33. The range of calls over a typical week though is between 10 and 18 calls. Approximately 10% of the people who call are screened off the air because they are incoherent, drunk, psychotic, or want to discuss non-psychological issues.

Information Presented Should be Concrete and Not Very Complicated

The audience does not respond well to abstract issues and information concepts but does respond when concepts are made very concrete and specific to their lives. Thus cases, examples, responses of other callers, and examples from the host's life are needed to

make principles of behavior come alive. Furthermore, when asking listeners to respond to some issue, the worst thing to ask is "what do you think about....." The latter statement gets virtually no response. The same thing is true of the classroom. Students respond much better when given a few moments to write a question or to list their responses to an instructors question in writing first. The instructor may then call on selected students for their reactions (c.f. Fuhrmann and Grasha, 1983). Unfortunately, this device is not appropriate for a radio listening audience. A talk show host does not call specific audience members. The audience calls the host. A technique that works well on the radio is to state what you believe and to have the audience agree or disagree with you. Thus telling the audience that he thinks homosexuality is a legitimate alternative lifestyle or that the Playboy cable television channel should not be censored generates quite a few calls.

A related technique is to give listeners options as you would on a multiple choice test. They are asked to pick one and to give their opinion. For example, a couple not sure about whether to marry needs to; (a) separate for awhile until they are sure; (b) go ahead with it anyway herause love will prevail; (c) live together for awhile to see what will happen. In addition, asking people to respond to a previous callers comments or problem or reading a letter from a listener and asking the audience how they would handle that situation also generates discussion. Unless the host remembers to be concrete and specific, he or she will have noone to talk with. When this occurs in the classroom, you can use various devices to call on the student or in a pinch--you can dismiss class. On the radio, its the listeners who call and "class" cannot be dismissed until the next show begins.

Repetition is Important

The name of the show, your name, what is being discussed, important points made earlier, station call letters, weather reports, the time, and upcoming events on future shows must be repeated. Repetition is needed because a radio audience tends to listen in spurts. A radio audience tunes in and out, comes in late, and does not hang on every word.

Fortunately, the host does not see the audience fluctuating but he or she must be aware of the problem. A certain amount of repetition and redundancy helps to overcome this problem. For someone who is listening to the whole show, this appears unnecessary and maybe annoying. But for most listeners, repetition is needed if the host wants any chance of involving them. The rating services reflect this shift in the audience since they measure listenership in 15 minute increments. Thus, their average listenership estimates are for 15 minute increments. The value of doing this is illustrated on a show discussing biofeedback and stress reduction. Having described it during the first hour, a second hour caller said; "all of what you are saying sounds interesting, but what the heck is biofeedback."

Timing is important.

A clock runs on a radio show in ways that it does not in the classroom. Commercials, news and weather breaks, and other announcements must be aired at a certain time. Thus, the host must shape his advice to callers, mini-presentations, interview questions of guests, comments to callers, and the time given to a listeners opinion to the realities of the clock. While a listener can be put on hold for a commercial or news break, continuity and flow of the discussion is disrupted. Thus, an important skill is to be able to shape whatever is done to some rather rigid time constraints. In the classroom, one can pick up with the next class session. On the radio this is not possible.

Enthusiasm is necessary.

On the radio your personality and interest in what you are doing is communicated through your voice. That is all the listener has to make judgments about you. Consequently, it is important to be enthusiastic and to display some energy on the air. This must be done even if you had a long day and are tired and miserable yourself. A dry low key voice is not appreciated by listeners. The guests, for example, that listeners best respond to were those who were bright and lively. Those who wanted to sound low key and professional did not receive as good an audience reaction. As another talk show host remarked, "radio is an energy medium and its your voice that conveys the energy." This

observation about radio parallels the research findings on student satisfaction with their teachers. Instructor enthusiasm is appreciated by students, leads to increased interest in the subject matter, and helps to separate teachers who receive good ratings from those who receive poor ratings (Centra, 1980; Seldin, 1980).

Role Conflicts Must be Resolved

Role conflicts make it difficult to "teach " on the air. A psychologist quickly finds himself surrounded by people eager to tell him how to run the show. Radio station personnel, university colleagues, private practitioners in the community, newspaper radio critics, and the host's parents, friends, neighbors, and family members have ideas. Unfortunately, they pull the host in different directions and create a classic case of role conflict. The host has heard on numerous occasions the following: Take more time with callers -- Take less time; Try to be more specific in making suggestions -- Be less specific; Have more guests -- have fewer guests; Dig a little deeper into the callers concern -- Keep things at the surface and forget about the depth; Have more "fun" topics -- Have more "heavy-duty" topics; Try to stay neutral on issues -- Try to be more controversial; Be more clinical -- Be less clinical; Talk more about sex -- Talk less about sex. Frustrating as it is at times, the host listens to what is said and tries to use the best of the advice. Yet there is something about all of the above advice that most people do not appreciate but which the host is acutely aware. When the national news ends and the show begins, the host is responsible for the next two hours. In the final analysis, the host must live with his conscience and do those things with which he is comfortable.

The Host Must Challenge Irrational Beliefs

On a talk show, an indication of how well you are doing is the number of calls you receive. In fact, callers are the only indication of interest in what you are doing. Unlike the classroom, there are no faces to focus on to measure interest. A problem is that some topics like child abuse or sexual dysfunction may have an audience's attention but people are not likely to call in large numbers. At least in conservative Cincinnati this is true.

Thus, the host on occasion has had angry thoughts about the audience and how they have "rejected" him and his "wonderful program." A host needs a good list of rational self-statements to rehearse when the calls are slow. Having lots of filler material helps as well. The problem to avoid is to equate the number of calls with feedback on how much you are liked or how well you are doing? The audience often listens but they may not always call in large numbers. Yet in a medium where your only contact with the audience is through the callers, it sometimes takes the best principles of "cognitive restructuring " to help you through the night.

Professional Issues In a Psychology Talk Show

"Teaching" on the public airwaves raises a number of professional and ethical issues. The following questions raise those issues as they apply to psychology talk shows in general and to the "Practical Psychology" program described in this paper. (1) Is radio an appropriate place to give principles of psychology away? (2) Is the talk show really teaching or an attempt at "quasi-therapy."? (3) Are the seemingly "simple questions" callers asked really smokescreens for more serious issues.? (4) Since the psychologist never knows who is listening, will the information produce more good than harm? (5) Will the lure of the media make psychologists reckless? (6) Do such shows create an unfavorable or distorted image of the profession? Finally, it is important to ask whether many of the issues raised in the questions above also relevant to teaching undergraduate courses where students are taught applied skills? A large number of Human Relations, Adjustment, and Applied Psychology courses have goals of explicitly teaching students self-help skills to help them cope with situations in their lives. One also wonders whether this creates unrealistic expectations of what they can do for themselves?

The questions and issues described above arose after listening to tapes of other psychologists on the air, discussing the "Practical Psychology" program, and talking about the factors involved in changing behavior. One conclusion we have arrived at is that we do not agree with each other on how to answer the issues posed in the six questions. It was

this disagreement that characterized our discussions about the show and eventually led us to write this paper. Thus, we present them below in terms of our individual responses in order to capture some of the controversy and to articulate a broader set of concerns.

Is Radio an Appropriate Place to Give Away Principles and Concepts of the Field?

AFG. Several years ago, George Miller argued that psychologists need to "give it away" (Miller, 1969). His point was that there is a tremendous lack of sophistication about psychology and how it can be used. Psychologists have been depicted as keeping the "treasures of the field" within their private practice offices and classrooms and making them available only for a fee. This relative degree of selfishness, Miller argues, is not in the best interests of the profession or society. A quick glance at any newspaper or television news show will quickly show that ineffective means of adapting are widespread. It would be nice if if more people considered using some of the knowledge the field of psychology has accumulated in their affairs. However, relatively few are going to see a therapist, take a course, or purchase a book. Radio and other public media give the general population a chance to become familiar with some of this knowledge. Psychologists must become better at communicating what they know to a broader audience. For many listeners, the radio may be the only way they will get exposed to such information. The greater good lies in giving psychology away. If we withhold such information, we miss a good opportunity to inform the general public about aspects of their behavior in a communications medium to which they normally listen and respond.

LL: While radio and television attract mass audiences for shows that have psychological appeal, they also have characteristics that lend themselves to distorting the "treasures of the field." My concern is that the format of radio talk shows can result in a serious compromise to both the caller and the profession. This is particularly true with the personal problem oriented call. Hosts generally encourage such calls and a listener's concerns are addressed. Given the time constraints of radio and television shows, there is rarely enough time to really address a concern well. Most questions on talk shows are

handled within 5-8 minutes. Thus the caller and listeners get a relatively brief point of view on what is often a complicated issue. Since the audience is generally not very sophisticated with regard to psychological issues, then the possibility of that audience distorting and misunderstanding what is said is likely to be very high. We may underestimate how much people need to know in order to appreciate what is said on radio and television.

Furthermore, the "advice" that is given may not be the kind of information that people ultimately need. It is also important to make the general public aware of the multitude of factors that affect the utilization of information being disseminated. For example, it is easy to become disillusioned by an inability to effect behavioral change unless one understands that such things as self-perception, ego strength, hope, timing, social support, and other factors play a major role in the process. Perhaps we need to teach people more about "how to change" and provide tools for that process as opposed to focusing on what changes to make. For example, explaining shaping or reinforcement theory provides techniques listeners can apply to numerous situations in their lives and allows them to make value judgments about what they want to change. Listeners also need introduced to the concept of "resistance" so that they can recognize when they need professional help.

The question is not "should we give psychology away but how." Perhaps, we would be better off concentrating our attention in mass media like newspapers, magazines, and books where relatively more information about issues like anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, shyness, communication difficulties, and other psychological issues can be presented. Such formats would also allow more information to be presented about the range of strategies available to people for changing their behaviors and the problems involved in using them.

Is the Psychology Talk Show Teaching or an Attempt at "Quasi-Therapy"?

LL. "Practical Psychology" and other talk shows run by psychologists have a

disclaimer at the beginning of the program that says the show is "not psychotherapy nor is it a substitute for psychotherapy." Yet in the broad sense of the word, isn't any type of intervention directed toward helping people, particularly in response to a specified problem under the rubric of "treatment." And even, if listeners are able to hear the disclaimer, can they distinguish certain elements of the show from psychotherapy? Most callers are probably not able to make the distinction between advice or teaching about behavior and psychotherapy. We need to do that for them. This latter task is difficult to do on the air and a further complication is that some media psychologists are themselves not clear about the distinction. In a recent article, at least one talk show host claimed that "what I did on the air is not that different from what I do in my office " (Zussman, 1983).

A related issue is that the caller's perception is that he or she is presenting a problem to a psychologist with an expectation of receiving help. The kind of help offered should represent a degree of professional judgment and be superior to that obtained from a friend or other important person in the caller's life. Yet, because we are attempting to give that kind of "superior assistance" there is a real danger of crossing the line between "education and therapy." The advice is educational if it has general applicability. I suspect it borders on a therapy intervention when it becomes too specific.

AFG. Psychotherapy is a very special relationship between a therapist and client. It has specific therapeutic goals and structures, is done in private, a time commitment is required for helping clients, and the client pays for the services. Jacqueline Bouhoutsos organizes some of the current issues in this area when she writes: "The few minutes available in the electronic media cannot possibly be compared with even the briefest of brief psychotherapy.....It is important that audiences be taught the differences between radio psychology and psychotherapy so that those who do seek therapy will not expect instant cures and directive therapists. Of course, the majority of listeners in the mass audience may never want, or even need, psychotherapy. But many appear to find radio psychology useful, perhaps even therapeutic-- just as an afternoon nap, a dip in the pool,

meditation, or jogging may be therapeutic. But clearly none is psychotherapy" (Bouhoutos, 1983, p. 33).

Instead of quasi-therapy, I see the talk show format as an interesting way to presenting listeners with ideas about behavior they may not have previously considered. The listener receives information and advice that is probably a bit more sophisticated than what he or she could hope to receive from a friend or neighbor. In case we have forgotten, mental health professionals are generally the last people to which the general public takes its problems. Less than one fifth of those who saw themselves as having psychological problems took those problems to mental health professionals. By contrast, more than two thirds brought them to their clergy or physicians (Gurin, Veroff, and Feld, 1960). Friends, Bartenders, hairdressers, lawyers, and a person's supervisor at work are also consulted more often than mental health professionals (Cowen, 1982). Thus, the information and advice dispensed on the air probably fits well with people's natural learning style when it comes to solving their problems. <u>They largely try to work things out by themselves and consult the people in their environment with whom they have easiest access.</u> On the radio, psychological information becomes easily accessible and we hope it is a bit more accurate and sophisticated than the information they might receive from their local bartender or hairdresser.

The issue of how to let listeners know that the "brief encounters" with them is not an example of psychotherapy is a difficult one to handle. One response is that in spite of disclaimers or any other statements by the host, and having therapists on as guests to discuss their work, a certain amount of confusion will exist. At some level, people would have to experience psychotherapy to really know what it is about. Some listeners have undergone therapy and they know the distinction. A second way to approach the problem, and the one that I prefer, is to not make such a big deal about it. It should be clear from the description of my show, that it is not based on a counseling or therapy model. Its roots lie much more in a classroom model of teaching and learning. Advice that is given is clearly

portrayed as "principles of self-help psychology" and not as anything else. The point is that regardless of how such shows are structured, they are primarily educational in nature and listeners can probably understand that what they are receiving is information and not a window to the therapists office.

A related issue here is that some people I and other hosts have met have criticized such shows from the vantage point of the psychotherapy model. Thus, they are willing to argue that any comment a psychologist makes in a public medium is tantamount to attempts at treatment. This is not in my opinion justified. If it were, we would have to count all of the things we say in newspapers,in TV interviews, magazine articles, and books directed toward the general public and any public utterance as treatment. Under such conditions, the word treatment loses its meaning because it is too broad. There is a tremendous need for information about behavior and I think we can give it without calling it treatment. For this point of view to become widely accepted, people are going to have to view such shows from the vantage point of an educational-teaching model.

Are the Seemingly "Simple Questions" Callers Ask Really Smokescreens for More Serious Issues?

LL. The presenting problem someone has is often a smokescreen for more central, perhaps unconscious psychological issues in a person's life. There is almost always an underlying meaning to a question. Perhaps the caller is seeking a solution to a dilemma, asking permission to continue present behavior, or just wants some reassurance that they are not mentally disturbed. An important issue here is that given the complexity of most concerns, how can the nature of the problem be adequately assessed and help given? The risk is that the brief amount of information given is probably inadequate and the potential for its misunderstanding exists. Should a host address the caller's problem directly, there is the risk of making hasty assumptions about the meaning of the call and perhaps the underlying causes of the problem. Hence, quick and questionably accurate diagnoses are made. Should the host chooses to abstract an aspect of the caller's problem to make a

teaching point, there is a risk of not addressing and therefore not helping the caller. Given the seemingly unsophisticated concrete nature of a high percentage of the caller population, people may simply receive an unreasonable view of what they can do for themselves.

Of course, some caller's problems can be taken at face value, as opposed to being symptoms of difficulties of a more serious nature. Even though they appear simple and have similarities to issues faced by other listeners, the situations and context in which they occur are almost always different. The strengths and weaknesses an individual brings to that situation also always vary. Hence advice to a caller may not be right for someone else who is listening and therefore the information is misleading. Furthermore, giving simple advice is diametrically opposed to the essence of what the mental health professions need to communicate, i.e., helping the individuals arrive at their own solutions versus solving their problems for them. The latter is something people can get from a "Dear Ann Landers" column in the newspaper and the need for psychologists to enter that business is debatable.

AFG. Sigmund Freud once remarked that "a cigar is just a cigar." I do not think we have to look for a deeper issue every time someone says their finger is sore. While deeper issues are often present in a callers life, a talk show host is not obliged to deal with them on the air. All of the hosts make frequent referrals for callers who should pursue professional help. The best that can be done on the air is to offer some support; help them to clarify a problem and to see that they do have options; or to give them information in the form of advice and suggestions. Furthermore, we probably need to quit viewing the general public as helpless individuals who left to their own devices can do little to resolve their problems. For some problems like breaking bad smoking and eating habits, people are often much more successful working on them alone than they are with professional help (Schacter, 1982). Also, psychotherapy is not a panecea for a person's problems. While it can be helpful, research demonstrates that a failure to change occurs and people

occasionally get worse after therapy (Zilbergeld, 1983). My experience teaching self-help psychology and writing textbooks in the area suggests that people can put psychological principles to work in their lives. They can also achieve a certain degree of success working on problems they face. When the issues are deeper than they originally thought, my experience suggests people discover this and recognize the limitations of working on them alone. Data from my courses over the past 10 years indicates that 75% of the students are able to have at least a "small victory" trying to resolve some concern in their lives (Note 4).

Since the Psychologist Never Knows Who is Listening, Will the Information Produce More Harm than Good?

LL. We know from the research on psychotherapy that "treatment can be harmful to your health." The premature removal of a symptom for an individual might not be effective. At worst, it could cause serious harm, as serious as precipitating a psychotic break. Should this occur, the caller does not have the on-going relationship with a therapist to help "pick up the pieces," or even to just help integrate the psychological intervention. Since radio talk shows dispense "principles of psychology" in many ways, this might occur by something the host says directly to a caller or from just listening to what is said on the show.

In addition, the very presence and availability of a psychologist on the air may elicit a lot of magical thinking from the audience. The quick, simple responses provided by the talk show host create a false impression of ease with which psychological problems can be solved. Furthermore, the directness which must be used to address problems in a brief period of time distorts the role and hence the function of a psychologist. This may have several harmful effects. It may discourage people from persisting with a treatment process which, contrary to the media image, is often lengthly and painful. Callers who consult the radio talk show psychologists about problems in their therapy run the risk of sabotoging their therapy. Whether other risks are present is certainly debatable. Fortunately, the

risks are something that could be empirically examined. In the absence of hard data on these issues, certainly a great deal of caution is needed.

AFG. There is certainly some potential for harm to occur to the listener. But the reality of what happens does not match those fears. People with serious problems are screened out before they get on the air and given referrals. Similarly, on my show, about 10% of the callers with a problem are given a referral or they are asked to consider professional help. Furthermore, listeners know that referrals are possible and if needed, all they need to do is call and ask. Thus, some long-term help is offered to listeners.

I also believe we need to give callers to talk shows more credit. Most are not about to have a psychotic break. In fact, as a group they do tend to be rather well adjusted (Rubenstein, 1981). Carin Rubenstein finds that callers are generally no more lonely, bored, unhappy, or self-denigrating than other people. Furthermore, just because the host says something, a caller or listener do not automatically go out and do it. For example, my experience checking up on referrals suggests that outside of crisis line referrals, callers very seldom seek professional help when it is suggested. One caller even took the time to call me back to say that the suggestions and referrals I made to help him care for a physically ill wife were made sense. Unfortunately, he was going to continuing doing things his way. People are not robots blindly doing what the psychologist says or anyone else for that matter. They really do have a mind of their own and we must give them more credit for this.

As a further check on the widespread harm of such shows, I engaged a local law firm to do a legal search of lawsuits brought against mental health professionals, doctors, and dentists doing call in shows. The firm found no recorded instances of lawsuits brought against a psychologist or any other professional active in radio or television(Note 5). Furthermore, the APA insurance trust has no record of a talk show psychologist insured by them getting sued (Note 6). If "call the doctor" type shows are doing widespread harm, one would assume a large number of court cases would have evolved.

Contrary to widespread harm, the talk shows, seem to be well received by the general public. They draw good Arbitron ratings and every host, and I'm no exception, receive letters and calls from people on and off the air thanking us for some idea or suggestion. My impression is that listeners appreciate a radio show that deals with psychological issues.

Will the Lure of the Media Make Psychologists Reckless?

LL. Will psychologists say things on the air they would not ordinarily say in private? Will the lure of the media make them say things to be entertaining rather than professional? Will they misrepresent themselves? These questions are important because to become a celebrity may cloud a profe sional's better judgment. To have thousands of people listening to what you say could lead to might lead someone to eventually feel omnipotent. Living in the "limelight" can be a "heady" experience and I wonder how well equipted psychologists are for handling the experience?

There is also the issue of becoming reckless with the regard to the ethics of the profession. While advice of an educational nature is apparently ethical, is this principle violated when the advice is quickly shaped to fill the time before the next commercial or newsbreak? Do some callers run the risk of receiving even less than the limited amount of time because they called at the wrong time. In the classroom, a one hour lecture condensed to fit five minutes is hardly educational. The more information is condensed the less likely the caller is going to be able to receive what would be minimally helpful.

AFG. I would like to think that I and other hosts are not going to abuse the fact that they are public figures. There are, however, some existing mechanisms to keep us ethical and honest. Local professional organizations monitor the shows and the hosts are not insensitive to comments from peers. In addition, state licensing boards exist and they can intervene if abuses occur. Finally, the Association of Media Psychologists have developed some tentative guidelines for such shows. Members of the association, of which I am one, have agreed to use them. They clearly state that the purpose of the show is

education and that provisions for referrals, screening calls, etc, be established. Such guidelines should help to keep people honest. Finally, being brief with a caller has to potential to undermine even the educational nature of the program. But, callers can be kept on hold over commercial and newsbreaks, mini-presentations on points raised by the caller given, and since there is enough repetition of basic concerns across callers, points shortened with one caller are undoubtedly given more time with others.

Do Such Shows Create an Unfavorable or Distorted Image of the Profession?

LL. It seems that some of the proceses which enhance the entertainment aspects of the show blur the boundaries between psychologist and any other radio talk show host. For example, stating one's own beliefs for the sake of eliciting audience response is contradictory to the image of a psychologist as a neutral, non-judgemental professional. Also, as you do on your show, using callers to help other callers implys that the audience's expertise is on a par with that of the psychologists. This poses a risk of undermining the field and interfering with an appreciation of the high level of training required by the profession. Your earlier comment about psychology not being the "last word" and "its alright to see that professionals disagree" also must be considered with caution. We must appreciate the power of the authoritative position we hold and the subtle messages which get conveyed to an audience over the air.

AFG. One goal of a show like mine is to get people to question their beliefs and to talk about issues. To do that, one must in part play the role of a traditional talk show host. Some of the techniques they use are just as useful in talking about divorce, rape, disciplining children, as they are an audiences reactions to a presidential news conference. I have always believed that in large classrooms, an entertaining component is needed to hold the students attention during a presentation. For me, education and being entertaining go hand in hand. On the radio, the two must also blend. Once the microphone is switched on, a host is no longer "just a psychologist." He or she becomes, whether they like to admit it or not, a radio personality and entertainer. I think listeners are smart

enough to recognize the fact that how you behave on the air is not necessarily how one behaves in other areas of their professional lives.

Involvement in the media does not weaken our professional stature. If anything, it enhances it. People are curious about themselves and others. My experience based on letters from listeners and their comments on the air, is they really appreciate the effort to reach them on the radio. What psychologists need to do is to worry less about professional image and more about different ways to let people know what we are about. To do it, we may need to assume the role of radio-talk show host, newscaster, magazine writer, and other non-traditional roles. If anything we must remember that not everyone wants to visit the office of a neutral, objective professional. Yet everyone I've ever met wants to know more about themselves. To reach such people, we may have to occasionally "let our hair down."

Talk Show Psychology and Undergraduate Teaching

While some people have been shocked and dismayed to find psychologists and other mental health professionals taking to the airwaves to present their versions of "applications of psychology", many of the same things have been going on in the college classroom for years. In fact, the past ten years have shown an increasing interest in courses in human relations, applied psychology, and psychology of adjustment that give students real life experiences using principles of psychology. Those teaching the courses work with students on resolving problems and using principles of psychology in their environments (c.f., Grasha, 1974) All of the issues raised above are relevant to the classroom as well. Should we give principles of psychology away in the classroom? Are such courses "teaching" or attempts at "quasi-therapy"? Are the seemingly "simple questions" students ask really smokescreens for more serious issues? Will the information produce more harm than good? Will teaching such courses make psychologists reckless? Does the manner of teaching an applied course distort or otherwise create an unfavorable image of the profession? The reader will have to supply his or her own answers to such

questions. Our position is that whenever the "treasures of the field" are given away, such questions will not be far behind. Whether a teacher, talk-show host, or interested bystander, we ought to at least have reasonable answers to such questions. Such questions force us to consider our goals and objectives and to insure that we are behaving with some rational purpose.

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Reference Notes

Note 1: Electronic psychologists. CBS radio Newsmark program, January 31, 1982.

Note 2: Proposed ethical guidelines for media psychologists. Association of Media Psychologists, 1982.

Note 3: Personal communication with Edward Busch

Note 4: The effectiveness of teaching self-help psychology. Unpublished data, 1980.

Note 5: Legal search completed by law firm of Taft, Stetinius, and Hollister, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1982.

Note 6: Personal communication with APA insurance trust coordinator.

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Footnotes

1. A version of this paper was presented at the meetings of the American Psychological Association, August, 1973 in Anaheim, California.

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